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AUTHOR Berry, Paul; Francis, John Bruce
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a conceptual framework that can order the host of changes occuring in institutional structure as a consequence of recent learner-centered reform in postsecondary education. Several schemata are examined, and a functional systematization of structures suggested; however, none of these purports to be a completely satisfactory model that can explicate the interactions of the complex institutional structures of contemporary post-secondary education. The major purpose of this paper is to find a pattern in all of the changes to develop explanatory frameworks, based on societal expectation, internal organization, and the political process. (Author/MJM)

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PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE: LEARNER-CENTERED REFORM IN A MULTI-FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM

Paul Berry
Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, N.Y.

John Bruce Francis
State University of New York at Buffalo

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a conceptual framework which can order the host of changes which have occurred in institutional structure as a consequence of recent learner-centered reform in postsecondary education. Several schemata are examined, and a functional systematization of structures suggested; however, none of these purports to be a completely satisfactory model which can explicate the interactions of the complex institutional structures of contemporary postsecondary education.

Early in the decade, The Newman Commission (1971) described:

> ...disturbing trends toward uniformity in our institutions, growing bureaucracy, overemphasis on academic credentials, isolation of students and faculty from the world - a growing rigidity and uniformity of structure that makes higher education reflect less and less the interests of society. (viii).

The era of mass education, for all its social accomplishments, has thrown post-secondary education into a period of dissensus; the postsecondary establishment has become increasingly concerned about alternative delivery systems to provide educational services for new and highly diverse clienteles. The institutions which have served postsecondary education's traditional clientele are finding it necessary to change--their attitudes, admission policies, curricular arrangements, evaluation standards, and even their very structure. K. Patricia Cross (1974) traces a fundamental shift in attitude toward students which has accompanied these changes. Cross suggests that the traditional emphasis led to selection of those students who seemed most likely to meet prevailing academic standards. Open admission, with its influx of students ill-prepared to meet those standards, has led to the development of the Remediation Model (11), which is designed to alter behavior patterns during the educational experience and to bring students ultimately into conformity with prevailing academic standards. This model represents a broadening, but no fundamental change of traditional attitudes; still, it is the student who must conform. More profound change is suggested by Cross' Pluralistic Model -- the notion that institutions can and should change in response to student needs, life patterns, and customary study habits -- and by formulations such as the "Learning Society" which incorporate openness to proprietary institutions, the world of work, and proliferation of institutional missions.

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The major purpose of this paper is to find a pattern in all of these changes, that is, to develop explanatory frameworks which can generate insights and hypotheses about organizational patterns and structures now extant, and about those which are likely to develop. The intent is not to force actualities into a rigid schema, but to test the conceptual frameworks which develop to explain structural patterns and social exigencies.

Societal expectation. On the premise that structures change in response to the societal purposes they serve, it seems clear in these times that substantial change in post-secondary education institutions is inevitable. The dissensus identified by the Newman Commission can be resolved only through alternative formulations of the relation between postsecondary education and society. Howard Adelman (1973:44-45) suggests a schema which relates changes in institutional orientation to changes in societal function. The following table presents a synopsis of his schema:

Type	Phase	Characteristics
I. Mission University: provides mature sense of values and detached intelligence	A. Sanctuary of Truth: inculcates character	Aristocratic social structure contrasts with bourgeois society
	B. Sanctuary of Method: emphasizes professionalism and status	Oligarchical political structure contrasts with egalitarian society
		Truth infinite: accumulate data and theories
		Scientific method and empiricism as ends in themselves
II. Mirror University reflects current values and engaged intelligence	A. Social Service Station: affluent and supported by political power	Hierarchical structure is democratized
		Middle classes invade university
	B. Culture-Mart: based on consumer support	Bolsters status quo technological system by satisfying manpower needs
		Provides egalitarian society a common language and sense of values

Analysts such as Bennis and Slater (1968), Boulding (1968), Cross (1974), and Trow (1973) seem to hypothesize a developing society best served by a system of post-secondary education with the qualities of Adelman's "Culture Mart." They tend to agree that, in an aggregate of educational institutions developing from elite to mass to universal access, the perception of movement from received belief to tested method -- from expertise to direct mirroring of egalitarian society -- may be the key to understanding the structures which are now developing.

Scarcity of resources is challenging our current belief in the ultimate efficacy of expertise; and technological expansion is being superseded by affective, pluralistic, and allegedly more humane values. At the same time, societal expectations regarding the skill level of the populace are increasing to the extent of requiring fourteen years of education in the "Culture-Mart." Martin Trow (1973) focuses on this compulsory nature of universal higher education, suggesting the need for "consent units" to provide a sense of belonging in the midst of a complex, impersonal milieu. Perhaps one valid attraction of small residential units within large universities (an institutional form that predates, but seems an inherent example of learner-centered reform) is that they provide precisely such "consent units" for undergraduates. Trow's concepts of "autonomous" and "popular" functions focus on conflicts between egalitarian societal expectation and subjective needs--

undifferentiated mass public, burgeoning occupational structure, and leveling of cultures versus pluralism, personal identity and subjective meaning. Postsecondary education is the social agency called upon to adapt institutional structures to a large and increasing variety of needs of the individual and society.

Another aspect of the Culture-Mart" is its basis in consumer support, which implies the development toward a truly pluralistic educational system to which Cross alludes in her discussion of attitudes towards students (see above). In the Pluralistic Model, a social context exists in which "... equality and individual differences can co-exist compatibly," in which individuals can "...exit from college with different competencies" (1974:11). (This model - requiring genuine alternatives in curriculum, measurement of achievement, and standards of individual accomplishment - seems a product of Adelman's "Culture-Mart," with its recognition of legitimate multiple modes.)

Kenneth E. Boulding (1968) particularizes the gap between the "Social Service Station" and the "Culture-Mart" by commenting on the probability of massive "...under-employment of intellectual resources..." in the former. He continues:

> We need to look therefore at the blocks to learning and particularly for the points at which social organization can improve the learning performance. We must also look at the distinction between useful knowledge and useless knowledge...(154)

Boulding suggests that the "Social Service Station" has been effective in preparing people to be middle-class, but that "...a social invention is needed...which will give the culture of the poor a status of its own" (173). Rather than the "melting pot" metaphor of the past, he envisions "...a 'mosaic' society, composed of many subcultures each of which gives its participants a sense of community and identity which is so desperately needed in a mass world." This hypothesized future is humanistic as well as pluralistic; "It must never be forgotten that that ultimate thing which any society is producing is people" (175); [illegible], men, not manpower; people, not biologically generated nonlinear computers.

Internal organization: Integration of differentiated functions. The environment of higher education is an intersection of competing interests. If the paradigm postulated above does in fact come about, adjustments will need to be made within organizations to reflect a change from a pattern of internal control based upon adherence to a common rationale with established decision procedures, to a pattern based upon the balancing and integration of competing interests. When Clark Kerr (1963:20) facetiously characterized universities as held together by a common grievance over parking, he was alluding to what now appears a relatively minor conflict of interest, compared with current and anticipated diversity.

Postsecondary education is more an aggregate of diverse organizations than a hierarchic structure which lends itself to simplistic generalizability. The very size and complexity of postsecondary education suggest that a more appropriate formulation would account for the systemic balancing of a multiplicity of functions, rather than their reduction to a false unity. Ervin Laszlo's notion of "functional autonomy" (1972:115) of various elements--both among institutions and among their constituent units--suggests a means of integrating multiple goals based on fundamental societal expectations. As long as a sufficient number of elements accomplishes the prescribed overall objectives, individual elements retain a measure of freedom. The macro-system must be responsive to societal expectations, but relations among the various elements are plastic. Applied to postsecondary education, this notion implies that, as long as fundamental societal goals of sufficient trained manpower and sufficient access are met, the internal operations of specific institutions are likely to be granted autonomy. Moreover, the difficulty of central control in vast, diverse systems may guarantee a degree of creative inattention to alternative units.

Growth, modified by pluralistic expectation, results in added structural complexity; complexity leads to specialization and differentiation of function as postsecondary education responds to different societal demands. Boulding (1968) describes "...structural growth...in which the aggregate which 'grows' consists of a complex structure of interrelated parts and in which the growth process involves change in the relation of parts" (65). Given this understanding, problems of structural growth merge into problems of structural change or development, "...so that frequently 'what grows' is not the overall size of the structure but the complexity or systematic nature of its parts." In such an intricate milieu, the broad interest of society might best be served by systemic coordination or integration, e.g., state-wide coordinating boards or consortia. However, if institutional integrity and subjective meaning are deemed essential, the pressing need to focus upon systemic integration must be balanced by preserving the "functional autonomy" of various elements.

Educational constructs of the recent past, which prompted Adelman's "Social Service Station" description, have been dominated by a meritocratic mode toward which all were subtly induced to conform. The potential benefit of recognizing the "macro-system" notion lies in providing a means whereby these subtle pressures toward conformity may be counteracted. For instance, an obstacle to the development of differentiated structures is the tendency for societal agencies to evaluate them by means of what Boulding (1968) calls "simplistic constructs" which "...exhibit closure in that any development outside the narrow circle of the self-contained system is inhibited" (78). Since, as any structure grows, the relations of its parts cannot remain constant, dependence upon such constructs necessarily produces (1) increasingly less accurate interpretations of societal expectation and (2) increasingly perverted evaluations of institutional functioning. This tendency is clearly reflected by the pressures to which any experimental unit is subjected by its parent institution (c.f., the Colleges of S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo or Monteith College at Wayne State University) which any alternative institution must face from the surrounding community (c.f., Federal City College), which proprietary institutions and non-traditional programs face from accrediting agencies (c.f., Marjorie Webster Community College or the management program of Arthur D. Little Corporation) and which all postsecondary education faces from state-wide coordinating boards.

Dependence upon simplistic, hierarchic sets of criteria may exacerbate difficulties in distinguishing between "system" as a descriptive construct and "system" as a prescriptive one. The prescriptive system is typically conceptualized as instrumental; i.e., it focuses upon measurable benefits. Measuring the effects of social action programs is fraught with unresolved questions (Rivlin, 1971:141). This is not to suggest that postsecondary education need not respond to changing expectations of a pluralistic society, but rather to emphasize that the very complexity of a multi-functional system may lead to imposition of stringent measuring devices and potentially abusive administrative regulations.

The distinction between prescriptive "system" and descriptive "macro-system" (i.e., in the sense of preserving "functional autonomy") clarifies specific problems, and contains within it the possibility of change and adaptation without loss of integration; it envisions future combinations--not as a single monolithic methodology, but as a heuristic model.

Political process. The context of postsecondary education posited above embodies a variety of interests, some of them shared and others conflicting. The macro-system construct suggests that the objective should not be to build a harmonious, closed structure, but one capable of identifying problems, developing problem-solving methodologies, and delineating domains which demand value judgments. Conflict is endemic whenever such processes are of prime concern.

"Conflict" in this context is not inherently pathological or destructive, but is a natural consequence of complexity. Pressure to pursue more goals and to become multi-valued, increased pluralism in constituencies, growing inter-organizational complexity, burgeoning demands for power among interest groups affected by postsecondary education -- these suggest the necessity for a "bargaining" or "political process" model focusing upon conflict among competing goals in the context of limited resources for postsecondary education. (This formulation appears particularly apropos to contemporary governance structures, both within and among institutions.)

Given the need to integrate a highly differentiated macro-system, conflict might be seen as the central element of coordination in the formulation of such a "political process." Conflict could be the key to essential systemic functions since it enables specific development of integrative devices, e.g., linking roles in the macro-system, separate units which have auditing or coordinating agenda, and other structural mechanisms intended to facilitate conflict-process and decision-making. Indeed, it appears that the macro-system could not function in the absence of conflict.

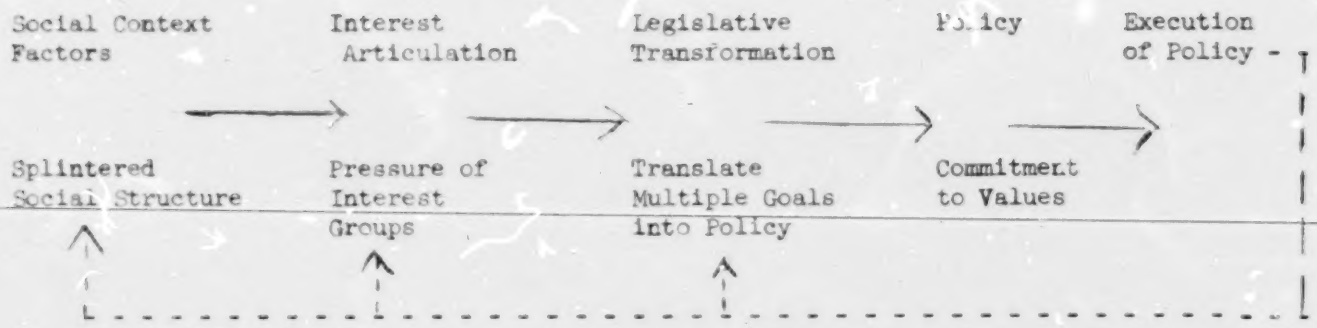
Political process as characterized above appears consonant with Boulding's notion of "developmental process" (1970:passim), which copes with a multiplicity of values considered to be of equal importance: "...the basic concept is that of testing...of individual propositions and the gradual adjustments of the total system" (73-74). Boulding's formulation is particularly pertinent in that he defines the learning process itself in terms of conflict among human constructs:

> ...the accumulation of knowledge is essentially a process by which man's image of the world is changed (34);
>
> Knowledge...grows by the receipt of meaningful information -- that is, by the intake of messages by a knower which are capable of reorganizing his knowledge (1956:54).

Political process, then, is a cycle of mutual modification through communication and feedback. Since in successful political processes decisions are interim, value judgments occur in the uncertain environment of unresolved conflict. Boulding (1956) provides the humanistic epitome of his notion of "development process."

> As we move forward into a society of the skilled, such a society would seem necessarily to be based on extensive discussion, accurate feedbacks, a network of mutual information channels, and an absence of coercion (109).

J. Victor Baldridge (1971) particularizes a political model in examining academic governance, with emphasis upon policy formulation at the level of the university. Although Baldridge's model does not focus upon macro-system concerns, its general outlines appear an apt summary to the understandings of conflict and political process framed above. Baldridge's model (22) is synopsized as follows:



The model recognizes the interim nature of policy decisions: a multiplicity of interest groups has impact upon major decisions, but a democratic tendency exists precisely because "...decision process is diffuse..." (193) in a milieu of negotiation. Baldridge's concepts were framed in the context of the complex, but single organization; they focus upon processes integral to the macro-system construct as well. For example, although his conclusion "...no single legislative body makes binding policy decisions, but instead a fragmented, segmentalized process occurs..." (192) is a result of research specific to a given university, such an insight generates observations, and suggests modes of conceptualizing processes in the macro-system. General applicability of this specific model is possible because the suggested applicability is aimed at analogical insights the model might further, rather than at holistic prescription of procedures.

To summarize, changes occurring in structure and organization in postsecondary education as a consequence of learner-centered reform can be conceptualized by integrating Adelman's formulation of the university's mission in society (the "Culture Mart"), the general systems notions of "macro-system" and "functional autonomy" (to focus upon the necessary mutual adjustments among institutions and between institutions and their constituencies), and the "political process" model of Baldridge (to handle the conflicts which multiplicity engenders). The characteristics suggested by such an integrated framework include:

1. the furthering of "consent units" in a compulsory context (e.g., experimental colleges, free universities, learning exchanges),

2. the recognition of the "mosaic" aspects of society which demand multi-functional postsecondary education,

3. the "functional autonomy" of sub-units within institutions and of institutions within state-wide systems,

4. the development and institutionalization of dynamic political devices and conflict-resolving processes which can integrate pluralistic values.

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